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THE PUBLIC'S PART IN PREVENTING FOREST FIRES

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Radio Address by Roy Headley, Assistant Forester in Charge of Operation  
U.S. Forest Service, in the National Farm and Home Hour, Friday, July 20, 1934.  
U. S. Department of Agriculture

Right now, we're in the midst of a season of unusually high forest fire hazard. Some of our forests have had a bad time of it for months because of extended drought. So you no doubt will be interested in what is being done to protect our vast areas of wooded country.

You should be interested because as an American citizen you are part owner of some 162 million acres of national forest land, the wise use and proper management of which is necessary to the welfare of the country. And organized and successful protection of forests against fire is absolutely essential to their perpetuation.

In 1917, over 3,000,000 people visited the national forests. This year, 35,000,000 are expected - and this has increased enormously the danger of man-caused fires. About 90 percent of forest fires are man-caused, and careless smokers and neglected campfires are responsible for most of them. More people in the woods usually means more fires. On the other hand there is a reduction in fire danger from railroads and logging companies.

Also we have made considerable progress in fighting fire. Thirty years ago forest fires were rarely fought unless they endangered other property. Neighbor helped neighbor, and equipment and methods were crude. There was no planned organization, no system of detection and speedy alarm, no preparation beforehand for swift attack, and only the most elementary fire prevention.

Since the Forest Service assumed administration of the national forests in 1905 there has been a steady improvement in the technique of fire prevention and suppression and continuous development of personnel, tools, and transportation and communication facilities. There has been an untiring effort to educate the public in care with fire in the woods and to reduce fire hazards.

From high towers or mountain peaks, trained lookouts watch constantly for the first sight of smoke. Equipped with binoculars, maps, and instruments, they locate fires very closely. When a fire is discovered the alarm is immediately transmitted to the rangers, and guards or "smoke-chasers" start at once. If the fire is a big one, or spreading fast, organized crews, provided with up-to-date equipment and emergency rations, are quickly mobilized and sent in. While shovels and grub-hoes are important equipment, increasing use is made of special implements and machinery, - horse-drawn or motor-drawn plows, water-throwing devices, such as knapsack pumps, and portable power pumps or motor drawn tanks.

Airplanes have been used for 14 years in national forest protection. They are valuable for reconnoitering large fires, for scouting, or for emergency transportation of men and equipment. For several years we have experimented with radio, and over 600 sending stations are now equipped with sets designed by Forest Service specialists. These are employed to maintain communication where the telephone system fails.

Detection and suppression, however, constitute only part of a modern protective organization. Much stress is laid on measures of prevention.

Long before the fire season opens on the national forests, district rangers must supervise the repair of roads, trails, firebreaks, telephone lines, lookout

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buildings, and other improvements. They must select and train the regular summer force of protection and improvement men; and select other competent men to be available when needed as fire fighters, fire-line foremen, camp bosses, packers, and truck drivers. Fire organization plans covering every emergency must be ready.

So, in our 150 national forests, we have a highly developed, efficient fire protection organization, as quick on the job as a city fire department. But the national forests are only a part of our country's forest land; there are large forest areas in State and private ownership where organized protection is extremely important.

The Federal Government and the States therefore are cooperating in forest fire protection with the ultimate aim of the adequate protection of some 420,000,-000 acres of forest land outside the national forests.

Effective protection of forest land has been greatly assisted by this cooperation. In 1911, only 16 States had appropriated money for protection of forest from fire. Today, thirty-eight States and 1 territory are cooperating. The Federal Government, the States, and private owners altogether put up more than \$5,000,000 last year for this work. Almost two-thirds of our total forest area is now under some degree of organized protection.

That there is a steady downward trend in forest fire losses, in the face of greater human use of the forests and long-continued deficiency in rainfall in the regions of greatest fire risk, is graphic proof of progress in the protection of national forests. But for the country at large, millions of areas are still inadequately protected. More than 41,000,000 acres burned over last year; -- nearly 90 percent of the loss occurring on lands without organized protection.

We are still severely handicapped in protecting the forests because the public fails to grasp the nature and extent of the problem and has made little progress toward eliminating the causes of fire. We must build up a proper and sympathetic public attitude toward public forest values, and secure the enactment of laws providing for safeguards in the use of fire in the woods and the punishment of carelessness, neglect, and incendiarism. Adequate fire control can not be realized without fire-prevention programs; without provision for competent executives, trained field forces, and physical improvements; and adequate equipment for preventing and suppressing fire.

Much of the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps will be of assistance in preventing fire; it will make it possible to speed up attack on fires, and improve the chances of catching them small. Already they have constructed more than 22,000 miles of truck trails to help make areas of fire danger more accessible; have added 13,000 miles to telephone lines to our communication systems; and built 17,000 miles of firebreaks.

Fire is no respecter of boundary lines. Burning of a watershed may increase flood danger a thousand miles away; destruction of valuable timber or recreation areas may effect business throughout a whole region. Fire prevention and suppression is therefore a public concern; the Federal Government, the States, communities, and individuals must all unite to beat the Red Demon.

We cannot prevent all fires. Many result from natural causes -- as lightening. But we can eliminate the 90 percent that are man-caused. It's everybody's job -- every man, woman, and child has a public responsibility in the prevention of fire. The Forest Service is calling upon the public everywhere to lend every cooperation and to be constantly careful with fire.

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